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## **Alienation and Quest for Identity in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *the Mimic Men* and *Miguel Street***

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### **Abstract**

*The Colonization by Great European powers of the Caribbean accounted for the islands becoming pawns in the hands of warring nations. Hence, the Caribbean as a place is regarded as the "Great Wrong" of imperial atrocities perpetrated against formerly colonized nations. This act foistered and festered on the peoples sensibilities, inevitably leaving them with a fractured psyche. The consequence is palpable as they continuously seek for true identity on the islands. V. S. Naipauls' novels embody this quest that reveals the alienation that confronts them in every facet of existence which is a further demonstration of their chequered history. This paper examines the residual effects of colonialism within the Caribbean and the struggle to address this dislocation in order to assure a recognizable identity for the people that guarantee a self-empowered Caribbean future.*

### **Introduction**

Vidiadhar Surajpasad Naipaul is seen as a colossus bestriding the entire corpus of Caribbean literature. Born in 1932 of East Indian descent, and trained at University College, Oxford, he published his first novel, *The*

*Mystic Masseur* in 1957. This opened the floodgates for others, and as at today, V. S. Naipaul has published over twenty-eight works. These include; *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), *Miguel Street* (1959), *A House for Biswas* (1961), *The Middle Passage* (1962), *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963), *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *The Mimic Men* (1967), and a host of others.

Naipaul's novels bring to life the complexities of understanding the nature of mankind against the backdrop of social influences that interact to give vent to such actions and activities. In his essay, "Fraud and Recompense: The Symbolism of Ganesh Ramsumair in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*" Chikodiri Okpara (2005:160) submits that:

Naipaul's fiction captures the minutest aspects of the sterile life of his society in his works in such a manner that leaves the reader with a raw account of life using customary fictitious characters to shed realities.

### **Alienation and Quest for Identity**

In other to appreciate the thrust of this paper and in particular the focus of Naipaul's literary output, it would do to lay bare albeit succinctly the historical antecedent that fertilized the literature in West Indies. The West Indian Island was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492 but as a result of slave trade abolition they could no longer take slaves from Africa legally to work in the plantations. This situation made these Europeans to indenture workers from India, who eventually were treated as slaves. The outcome is miscegenation, as there were whites, coloured people, and blacks. Politically and socially whites were on top of the ladder, followed by Indians (coloured people) and at the lowest rung, the blacks. This created antipathy and contempt.

Accordingly, Peter Nezaireth (1977:148) in his study, "The *Mimic Men* as a study of corruption" acquiesces that:

Such a society understandably has no inner values. It merely copies its way of life from western consumer society... it is dazzled by the glitter of luxuries. It admire only success

Burrowing in on this therefore one could see how alienated and rootless the people are in their environment. An underlying philosophy that V. S. Naipaul brings to focus in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *The Mimic Men* and *Miguel Street*, the three works this paper examines.

In her landmark essay, "A Redefinition of the Ideal Caribbean Identity...", Anthonia Ekpa(1990:68) reveals that:

the chequered history of slavery and later colonialism has not put a stamp of inferiority on the blacks, but has also made the West Indian lose confidence in himself... it has made him regard himself as half human and a failure.

The above statement could not find a better vent than in Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*. This story chronicles the life of Mohun Biswas who has a difficult emanating from childbirth and the prevailing circumstance that made family to relocate with its attendant dislocation, a situation that make him fall into the hands of a pious conservative landowning family of Hindu, the Tulsis where he is betrothed to one of their daughters, Shama, which he later revolts against.

There is no doubt that Mr. Biswas is facing an acute sense of insecurity giving the way things around him is turning out-living with a penniless mother in one room of mud hut. He is therefore desperately hunted by the future. Writing in *Homecoming*, Ngugi wa Thiongo (1972:93) observes that the "disorder he dreads is symbolized by the House of the Tulsis, where they try to turn Mr. Biswas into an object, to deny him private life and human individuality". He goes on to say that these fears were to follow him into his forties.

However, it is important to point that Mr. Biswas does not merely contemplate the above chaos. But instead chooses to fight back in his quest for his identity. The use of invectives, with or without humour becomes the other of the day, ridiculing of life in the Hanuman House of the Tulsis: 'and what about the two gods? It ever strikes you they look like monkeys? ...' (120), and weaves fantasies around himself. And when caught, he quickly turns into a clowning comedian. Espousing further on this, Gordon Rohlehr (1977:91) in his study, "Character and Rebellion in A House for Mr. Biswas" discovers that:

Throughout the book, Biswas rebels through the use of good, bad and sick humour sarcasm ...But the Tulsis come to regard his joke and accept him as a licensed buffoon, thereby neutralizing the effect of his wit...

Be that as it may, its pertinent to state that on a closer examination of the Hanuman House, one comes away with the realization of the house not

being a coherent reconstruction of the clan, but rather a slave society put up by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth who are in dire need of workers to rebuild their tottering empire. This observation is corroborated by Maureen Warner – Lewis (1977:95) in her pivotal study, "Cultural Confrontation, Disintegration and Syncretism in *A House for Mr. Biswas*". She posits that: "Naipaul depicts Hanuman House as a symbol of traditionalism, rigidity, cultural infallibility, ritual duty hierarchy and communal life" (95).

It suggests therefore that Mr. Biswas completely felt anemic and trapped in the house of the Tulsis. And most importantly, it was an antithesis to what he perceives as existence. It goes therefore that where the glory of Tulsidom is its capacity to induce conformity among its members, Mr. Biswas on the other hand revels and exalts his individuality. It was not difficult to appreciate his attempt at upsetting the "established" order when he bought a doll house for his daughter, Shavi.

In furtherance of this, he speaks Creole English in Hanuman house, where everybody speaks Hindi, ridicules Hari, does not relish the family and communal arrangements that tend to stifle the individual and deny him voice. He equally goes out of way in doing things contrary to Tulsi's expectation, "... it gave him some satisfaction that he was breaking one of the Tulsis taboos by eating shop bread" (140). In another submission, Maureen Warner Lewis takes a long and hard look at the situation and opines that:

the conflict in the story has strong bearing on clash of culture which accounts for the background to and explanation of many events in the novel as well as Mr. Biswas' difficulty of adjustment in his relationship with Tulsidom (94).

In applauding the above argument it is important to call to mind Rose Acholonu's(1987:1978) assertion in her essay, "The West Indian Novelist and Cultural Assertion ..", that the West Indian novelists have consistently focused their attention on, and seen the economically under-privileged, culturally disposed black peasant as the authentic West Indian. It therefore goes to show that the whole corpus of West Indian literature can be seen as a "cultural manifesto showing that the West Indies has not only a useable history and past, but also a future" (79).

Even though, Naipaul takes a swipe at established order who claim that they are working for peoples interest when in actuality their own interest that is being festered (The run of events at Hanuman House), Achoionu believes

that West Indies novelists are optimistic reformers whose artistic vision aims at the ultimate transformation of apparent ugliness to beauty; misery to everlasting joy and apparent hopelessness to hope (79).

Mr. Biswas' dogged fight with the Tulsis is all aimed at asserting himself in his quest for identify as a human being. But beyond this too, he struggles to anchor and situate himself in something he can really call his own. Therefore a house becomes automatically the symbol of everything that life itself has denied him, and also a symbol of order he wants to create. Ngugi (1972:93) further observes that his triumph over chaos comes when at last he buys a house, the sense of belonging of being rooted into his own, counterpoises, albeit uneasily, the overwhelming sense of exile and loneliness that has stalked his efforts in life.

In a similar vein, Kenneth Ramehand (1976:78-9) argues that:

the hero's achievement (for he is indeed a hero in spite of all his apparently unheroic qualities) lies in the attempt made with faith and ever-returning courage to interpose a human institution (the family) and a humanized object (the house) between himself and a universe threatening annihilation on every side.

As a matter of fact, the stifling manifestation and enslavement nature of the Hanuman House meant that a lot is expected of the person of Mr. Biswas in upturning the status quo. Formal education played vital role in shaping the persona of Mr. Biswas as the exposure made him to think differently from brothers and others. It also brought to him a life that is different from theirs, and at the same time awaken naturally alert mind and made a rebel and misfit in the midst of acceptors and conservatives that cling to Hindu traditions of the Hanuman house.

It is just therefore a matter of time for the Tulsidom empire to collapse. And reasons for this are not far-fetched, as education and topics in schools in the region are European. The influence of urban environment in Port of Spain also meant that the House cannot remain in isolation for long, hence values outside contrasted with that in the Tulsidom. There is also the small matter of economic boom due to influx of Europeans and their businesses. Also, quite contributing is the spirit of selfishness and rivalry among the inmates of the Tulsidom, especially Mrs. Tulsis' relocation to Port of Spain, thereby creating a leeway, culminating in the collapse of the Tulsidom.

For Mr. Biswas the message the house represents is that it is the symbol of the hero's refusal to fall under the weight of his society, but instead at the end he found himself in his own house on his own "half-lot of land, his own portion of the earth" (8). Therefore Mr. Biswas' search for security and quest for his identity is seen in concrete specific terms of definite social struggle. R. H. Lee (1977:69) in his essay praises Naipaul, arguing that: his success rests firmly upon this very ability to create unlimited indigent and memorable characters". In *The Mimic Men*, the underlying focus of this study is equally enhanced. Here, in what resonates as emerging country. Naipaul distinctively paints the picture of a development from an apparent colonial rule to independence. It is therefore glaring that the author is lot rolling out any red carpets for the kind of politics that is evident in the new country.

Naipaul not only hammers on individual identity but also the quest for political identity which can be brandished for all and sundry to see and appreciate. But once again, the new nation is enmeshed in political corruption that alienates its leaders and submerges the entire country. The actions of political leaders is akin to those of chief Nanga and Odili in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People, who tottered on what to do* with power in order to uplift the people in the African State.

It is pertinent to state here that whereas Mr. Biswas in *A House for Mr. Biswas* is of the oppressed and belongs to the lower rung of social ladder, the hero here, Ralph Singh is of the upper cadre and a successful real estate dealer, who in company of his friend Browne could not rise upto the challenges of a new nation. In the end they become alienated and being to look for where to escape to.

Naipaul (1967:37) castigates them:

They are manipulators. They offer themselves as, manipulators. Having no gifts to offer, they seldom know what they seek. They might say They seek power. But their definition of power is vague and unreliable.

Lending credence to the above observation, Peter Nazareth (1977:143) in his study *The Mimic Men*, as a study of corruption, offers that "*The Mimic Men* is unremittingly pessimistic. Hardly anybody reveals any ideas, any values beyond grabbing what one can for oneself ". This is true of emerging nations of today, and not just only in West Indies. Isabella Island symbolizes the new country, and the quest for identity here harps on the stability and order that is

expected of an emerging nation or democracy. But that inability to identify and situate itself in terms of problems and challenges rubs it of any potential to grow. Instead the hero, Ralph Singh demurs; "to be born on an island like Isabella an obscure New world transplantation, second-hand and barbarous, was to be born to disorder "(TMM, 118).

The above statement only reinforces his alienation and makes it more palpable. In his article, "The All Embracing Christ-like Vision: Tone and Attitude in *The Mimic Men*", Victor Ramraj(1977:129) opines that:

the form of the contemplative, therapeutical autobiography in *The Mimic Men* widens Naipaul's range and enables him to speak discursively on politics, power, isolation, displacement, racial conflicts and identity.

These wide spectrums of issues enumerated above and interrogated by Naipaul raises questions about the persons who closes to escape in the face of apparent failure, but the discovery of that move was shocking:

So quickly had London gone sour on me, The great city, centre of the world, in which fleeing discover, I had hoped to find the beginning of order (TMM, 18).

Here the respite and expected peace of mind vanished out of the window and so does the outcome of that exercise, Sandra eventually did not turn out to be what he thought.

So the moral fibre and drive needed for leaders to ensure their identity was lacking in Ralph and his friend Browne, and the result is alienation and escape. This reinforces Peter Nazareth's submission, that "the novel is not only about corruption but also about betrayal, and the recognition of betrayal presupposes to existence of moral consciousness and a scale of human values" (149).

In the novel *Miguel Street*, Naipaul decides on a conglomeration of different characters especially the not so do well in the community into one street in Port of Spain. Through this he dramatizes and quite effectively too the frustrating meaninglessness of urban poverty. The poverty and down trodden is so palpable that it seems the only way of survival is to escape from the excruciating environment, which the boy-narrator did through scholarship programme. However, according to Robert hammer the most positive aspect of this depressed world comes in way of their indomitable spirit which

continues to bring them up despite all inhibitions. And the result of this creation by Naipaul is a rewarding blend of poignant bitterness and pathos (xvi).

*Miguel Street* is episodic. All the characters in this street manifested the folly in human in apparently wanting to be on top of everything through whatever means that catches their fancy. Naipaul therefore ridicules the society and human existence, in not pursuing those issues that will benefit all and make the "new" world a fantastic place, but instead are interested more in self seeking and personal aggrandisement.

The street symbolizes openness and an all-comers affair and suggests a society with no moral values or principles, a society that mimics and particularly a society that is rootless, alienated, self-effacing with no appreciable mark of identity. This seventeen character related short stories, do have similar sketches. In the first story, Bogart the principle character does not believe in himself hence he imitates the "Casablanca" movie and the characters by using the American speech sounds. He was first known as Patience, because he played cards from morning till night" (9). Also, in the story, "The Thing Without Name", Popo, the major characters is not capable of creating anything, and answers same when asked. Asked of his occupation, he denies it, depicting an obvious lack of confidence, but would readily dip his hand into rum, in apparent love of western culture.

The same goes for "Wordsworth" who sells poems for survival, even though the society is not ripe for such creativity. Naipaul's critique of politicians is encapsulated in Man-man preaching session at a corner of Miguel Street: "These days you hear all the politicians and them talking about making the Island self-sufficient..." (42).The characters are funny, and waste their abilities and panders towards laziness in the activities. Naipaul takes a swipe at the West Indian environment for their lack of creativity and rising up to true challenges of nation building. And frown upon the fact that they have not done anything to shift away from moral decadence.

### **Style and Technique**

Naipaul employs the third person point of view in bringing the travails of Mr. Biswas in *A house for Mr. Biswas* to the readers. This enhances the understanding of the hero's movement from childhood to his "independence" and to understand the make up of other individuals not just from a biased view as first person would have done. This equally enhanced the development of Mr. Biswas' character as he keeps adapting to changing



situation in the novel. There is also appreciable dialogue in the novel which helps to make the characters come alive. Naipaul also allows the characters, depending on their background use their dialect an equally replicates same. This enhances also a fuller understanding of said individual. The structure of the book is into two parts, which helps readers see how the chief characters evolves over a period of time.

In *The mimic Men*, Naipaul uses the first person point of view. Readers see issues through the eyes of Ralph Singh and this somehow Jimits and stiffens the story. And as such does not encourage enough dialogue. This also accounts for the characters not really coming alive and even the hero, appears cold and detached without warmth. The perceivable negative disposition on Ralph does not leave him till the end of the story. According to Karl Miller, in his study, "V. S. Naipaul and the New Order", *The Mimic Men* is told in a complicated fashion, with flashbacks that gives rise to certain amount of mechanical trouble" (117). While it is acknowledged that flashbacks bring immediacy into story, the divergent scenes in the story only helped in ensnaring issues, as the first person point of view only fuels the speculation that the story was Naipaul's political testament. The language use equally depicts the continental outlook of events in the story.

While also in *Miguel Street*, the story of urban slum in Trinidad was told by a boy who speaks in first person. There is considerable dialogue in *Miguel Street* that was obviously lacking in *The Mimic Men*, added with the young narrator whose naivete and innocence render innocuous the ironical digs in the novels. In both *The Mimic Men* and *Miguel Street*, Naipaul uses a narrator- character mainly for distancing and evaluative purposes. While this technique encourage immediacy, comic exuberance and pathos in *Miguel Street*, such led to lack of dramatic intensity in *The Mimic Men*.

### **Conclusion**

This paper focused on the underlying issues in V. S. Naipaul's fiction giving the history of West Indies. The characters in the works, especially Mr. Biswas, Ralph Singh and those in *Miguel Street* all battled for proper identity and alienation from the society bordering on rootlessness of their existence.

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